



Odissi, the Cultural Crest of Odisha: A Historical Overview

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Abstract— The province of Odisha has carved a niche for itself in the global arena by virtue of three extraordinary things: (1) the sun temple at Konark, (2) Jagannath dham at Puri, and (3) Odissi, the classical dance form. While there's abundance of literature and discursive accounts about the first two, that way, the last one, Odissi, suffers from a dearth of knowledge portals. But for a few and far articles here and there, there's no substantive accounts available about this unique cultural art form and tradition. In spite of its prominent presence over a prolonged period of time, strangely enough, till late 20th century, many have made effort to undermine Odissi by considering it as a mere mimetic version of Bharatanātyam or kūcipūdi. Even though this point-of-view holds no ground in recent times, the lack of adequate credible accounts about the origin and history of this splendid dance form has somehow helped this view-point to score a point. Although pinpointing the exact origin of Odissi is nearly impossible, archaeological evidence confirms a tradition that dates back to over two thousand years. The Odissi dance of contemporary times may be less than a hundred years old in its present form, but the knowledge tradition of Odra-Magadhi dance and music has continued in various forms across the Odisha region. This chapter aims at offering an historical overview of this rich dance tradition. The focal length of this chapter ranges from the stone carvings of Konark to the stage of the Konark International Dance Festival.



Keywords— Odissi, classical dance-drama, Gotipua dance, Mahārī tradition, bhāba & rasas.

Since long, the cultural canvas of Odisha has been splendidly tinged with a strong and magnificent tradition of dance and music. This tradition has lent the Odia community with a distinct identity mostly along cultural and spiritual lines. The dance tradition is carved in the cultural history of Odisha. The walls of Konark Sun temple and many other temples predating the Black Pagoda are the standing testaments of it. For centuries, dance was a form of devotional ritual in the Jagannath temple and other temples as the Mahārī tradition up until its abolition and survived in the Gotipua practices. In the early twentieth century a Dance form was reimagined from the carvings of Kalingan temples and caves. The dance evolved from the centuries old Mahārī and Gotipua dance tradition woven in the Odishan cultural tapestry, giving it the name Odissi. The Odissi dance is one of the eight

classical dances of India recognized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. The Odissi dance from its inception has been an icon of Odisha's cultural prowess. It took the Odishan identity to the global stage. The evident similarity in the nomenclature, both Odisha and Odissi advanced in the post-colonial world concurrently. From as early as 2nd century wall arts of Khandagiri and Udayagiri to as recent as the collaboration between American Popstar Michael Jackson and Odissi dancer Yamuna Sangarasivam, the Odissi dance has a vast historical and cultural background. So to understand the origin and advancement of Odissi, comprehension of Odisha's cultural history of around a thousand years becomes vital. This chapter traces the roots of the dance tradition of Odisha and how this very individual school of art unique to the eastern state survived

the test of time to ultimately took the form of Odissi in the twentieth century.

For many centuries, the geographical area of Odisha was the cultural capital of eastern India for its prospering maritime and pilgrim destination. Odisha, owing to the geographical position, had been the meeting ground of various cultural currents, all integrated into a harmonious synthesis (Pradhan 2022, 48). The history of the Odissi dance can be dated back to the 2nd century wall painting of the Khandagiri and Udayagiri near Bhubaneswar. These caves were built during the reign of King Khāravēla, post the Kalinga war. During his reign he conquered the geographical area spanning from the river Godāvari in the south to the Ganges in the north. He was a Jain king and the caves were built to give shelter to Jain monks. There were inscriptions in the Hāthīgumphā and other caves of Udayagiri and Khandagiri eulogizing and praising the thirteen year reign of Khāravēla. Dr. Manoranjan Pradhan (2022, 48) writes:

¹The inscription in the Hāthīgumphā at Khandagiri reveals that king Khāravēla arranged the performances of Tandava and lāsya dance and music for the enjoyment of his subjects. Ancient Jain caves inscriptions and friezes speak volumes about the presence of dance traditions during the times of Khāravēla. In one scene in Hāthīgumphā a girl is seen offering flowers in a dance pose. Another scene depicts men and women singing and dancing around a tree. They all have been shown in worship, holding musical instruments. Many scenes depict female figures in dancing poses.

These representations which are earlier than the writing of Nāṭyasāstra can be easily considered as one of the earliest archeological evidences of a dance style in India. Nāṭyasāstra also mentions 'Odra Māgadhī' as one of the four regional dance forms present at that time, which is associated to the current geographical region of Odisha. From the inscriptions also throw light on the fact that King Khāravēla himself was adept in dancing which made him a great patron of the art. During his reign the dancers were specially trained people whose profession was very highly regarded in the society (Pradhan 2022, 48). The epigraphic records also show the elaborate costumes, ornaments and jewelry used by dancers while the inscriptions suggest that dance was the part of cultural life of the people as the king organized dance performances on significant occasions. Though the Khandagiri and Udayagiri sculptures are the oldest evidence of dance in Odisha that could be found but

the complex and elaborate nature the sculptures prove that the dance predates long before the reign of Khāravēla.

After the reign of Khāravēla, politically, Odisha went through a stagnant period until the rise of Mahayana Buddhism till the 5th and 6th century BC. This period doesn't provide ample evidence of any kind of cultural advancement. But with the rise of Buddhism the culture of Odisha also flourished with monasteries, shrines and Buddha sculptures of great finesse and with it flourished the dance of Odisha. Lalitgiri and Ratnagiri were the² epicenters for Mahayana Buddhism in Odisha where beautiful Vihars were erected. Beautiful sculptures of dancing figures in stylized poses were carved in those Vihars which are evidences of the significant presence of dance and music during that time. It is believed that during those days Mahayana Buddhist believed in dance as a medium of meditation and players (Pradhan 2022, 48). Sculptures depicting Buddhist gods and goddesses in different dancing postures were found in large numbers. This culture resurgence became the corner stone for the artist development of temples in Odisha in later years. During the reign of Keshari Kings, Odisha saw a surge in more sculptural and ornamental architecture in temple building. The Keshari Kings were responsible for building many Shiva temples in Bhubaneswar during this period, adorned intricate carvings, motifs and dance postures. Natamandapa or the dancing hall became a significant part of temple architecture during the time of Kesharis, which signifies that by that time dance and music has become a part of the daily rituals of temple offerings. Under the patronage of kings like Jajāti Keshari where the natamandapas became the cradle where dance and music prospered for centuries in Odisha in the name of Māhārī tradition. Māhārīs or Devadāsīs were girls who dedicated their life in the service of temple deities as dancers. They performed every day in the natamandapas as their offerings to the deity. So, with the Māhārī tradition and its association with the temples, the dance of Odisha was first institutionalized around 10th century AD.

The history of Odissi is intertwined with the cultural and social ups and downs of the Odia society. With the rise of devadāsī system in the eastern and southern part of the country, and Jagannath becoming the principal deity of Odisha region, Devadāsīs who are called Māhārīs became part of the temple rituals of the Jagannath temple. Māhārīs were the women dancers, who performed only in front of the deities to show their devotion. They considered themselves as the wives of Prabhu Jagannath and

¹ Pradhan, M. (2022). Odissi dance in temple art of Odisha. Paripex - Indian Journal of Research, 11(10). <https://doi.org/10.36106/paripex>

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dedicated their lives for the deity. The expression "Mahārī" is a derivative of two Oriya words 'Mahan' and 'Nari', meaning divine maidens (Acharya, 2015). During the reign of the Ganga Dynasty, in the 12th century King Chodaganga Deva formalized the role of Māhāris in the temple rituals and arranged for their livelihood. This step established Māhāris as the sole custodians of the dance and music of the Odisha region. The Māhāris were generally divided into six different categories of saviators with different sevās assigned to different groups. Dr. Rahul Acharya (2015) describes the groups as following:

1. Bhitara Gauni: She sang in the inner precinct of the temple, in the sanctum sanctorum. Her service was reserved for the evening during the Badashingara Vesha of the Lord.
2. Bahara Gauni: She performed her seva beyond the inner precincts of the sanctum sanctorum. She was supposed to sing during the Lord's ³breakfast or Sakala Dhupa, and other festivals that were celebrated in the temple.
3. Nachuni: They were from the dancing community who performed their service through dance.
4. Patuari: They were the group that provided the Lord's costume or Patani and were supposed to wear it.
5. Raj Angila: She was the servant of the Gajapati Maharaja or King, who was considered Lord Jagannath in the flesh.
6. Gahana Mahārī: They were assigned special tasks only on special occasions and always performed the service in groups. There was no individual seva for them.

The dance rituals were complimentary to the daily temple rituals and usually performed twice a day and special performances were also curated for some special occasions.

The music has a significant role in the performances. The music that was recited during the rituals is unique to the region. The Māhāris performed to the songs of Geeta Gobinda, written and composed by Jayadeva. The songs were composed in the Odra Māgadhī style and there is a great story that links both the song and dance in a divine bond. The story goes like this, A childless Brahmin devotee of Jagannath, Devasharmā, who shares the village Kendubilwa with Jayadeva prayed the lord for a child so that he will offer the same to the lord. A daughter was born, he named her Padmabati and offered her to lord Jagannath as promised. But in his dream and in the dream of the

priests of the temple, Jagannath directed to offer Padmabati to Jayadeva, a young Brahmin living an ascetic life, unable to find his purpose of life. After the marriage was performed, Jayadeva wrote, what is considered one of the greatest poetic creations of Sanskrit in last thousand years, describing the Cupid of Radha and Krishna in the Spring. Both the husband and wife performed in front of the deities singing the verses of Geeta Gobinda, while Jayadeva played the Mardala, Padmabati danced to it. With this the tradition of Māhāris performing to the verses of Geeta Gobinda was started in the Jagannath Temple. Special Gurus were assigned to teach the girls in the most pristine and devotional dance and music for the deities. With the royal patronage and the social acceptance the Mahārī tradition prospered in Jagannathdham, Puri, until Odisha lost its freedom in the sixteenth century.

As the Mahārī tradition started to decline due to multiple factors, a new tradition of dancers emerged from the Akhadas (gymnasium) of Puri. During the reign of Pratap Rudra Deva (1497- 1540), Baishnava Saint Chaitanya came to Odisha and with him came the Bhakti movement. He propagated a cult of Sakhi Bhaba, which believes that Krishna is the only male and all others are females. With this idea, the Gotipua Dance tradition took its foremost steps in the sahi akhadas of Puri. Boys of the age of 6 to 12, dressed in female costumes performed on different special occasions a special dance which is very similar to the Mahārī dance with some gymnastic additions. Girls were not allowed to practice this dance and the Akhadas became the cradle of this dance form. The Akhadas or the gymnasiums were primarily built to foster physical strength among boys, so that they could protect the temple from any kind of external attacks. During the reign of Bhoi King Ramachandra Deva, he gave patronage to these akhadas and the dance form thus prospered under royal patronage. The boys performed a repertoire called Bandha Nrutya, characterized by acrobatic and physically demanding exercises that could only be mastered at a young age (Ojha 2024, 2).⁴ In the dance the boys form different formations by stranding on one another. These forms of Bandha Nrutya were described in details in texts like 'Abhinaya Chandrika' and 'Sangita Darpana'. As the Mahārī tradition started to wane, it is in Gotipua that the Odramagadhi dance form survived to become Odissi in the Twentieth century.

Gotipua played a significant role in the revival of the ancient Odramagadhi dance in the form of Odissi. It was the Gotipua dancers who in their adulthood took initiatives

³ Acharya, R. (2015, February 27). Mahārī - The one who dances with devotion. Padmaa. Retrieved April 3, 2025, from <https://www.padmaa.com.br/en/mahari-a-que-danca-com-devocao/>

⁴ Ojha, M. (n.d.). The evolution of Odissi dance: From temple rituals to modern revival.2. International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR). <https://www.ijfmr.com>

towards the revival, standardization and promotion of Odissi as a classical dance form. As the royal patronage dwindled towards Gotipua, the dancers struggled to survive, they joined Jatra groups and some even left the art for farming of daily labor. With the lack of opportunity, the number of new comers declined. During this crucial time, some visionary Gotipua gurus started thinking beyond the Akhada premises. By this time, the Mahārī tradition also remained just as a symbolic ritual, struggling with its last breaths. Mamata Ojha writes:

The tradition ensured a continuity of dance practices, keeping the essence of the art form alive during a period of cultural upheaval. Prominent Gotipua teachers like Basudeva Mahapatra of Khurda, Kartika Sahoo of Bhringarpur, and Somanath Mahapatra from the district of Cuttack were instrumental in maintaining this tradition. Their dedication and teaching significantly contributed to the revival and formalization of Odissi dance in the 20th century. These teachers were not only skilled dancers but also custodians of a rich heritage, passing down intricate dance techniques and styles to the next generation.⁵

The twentieth century saw a cultural shift in the dance tradition in Odisha, and in India. Throughout the country, the dance forms were democratized and came out of the temple premises and royal courts to find new audience. Artists, academics, and fans of dance and music made a concerted effort to investigate the origins and development of these art forms throughout this time. They did so with a sense of pride and a deep appreciation for the rich cultural heritage they inherited.⁶ With this renaissance in the field of art, the dance of Odisha underwent a series of transformations finally to emerge as Odissi, one of the most celebrated classical dance forms of India and the World. The Journey of Odissi starting from 5th and 6th century BC through Mahārī tradition and Gotipua tradition to ultimately the current structure of the dance is a true testament of Indian knowledge tradition, where a dance form survived for thousands of years without losing its originality. The classical Odissi dance of contemporary time is a structure of 60 years old, standing on the Odra Māgadhī dancing tradition. Up until the 20th century, the dance tradition was mostly in the oral tradition passing down through Guru Sishya Parampara.

The term "Orissi" (Odissi) was introduced by Kavichandra Kalicharan Patnaik in 1948, derived from "Odra Māgadhī".⁷ Before that in early 1940s the dance form was commonly known as Oriental Dance on the stage where dances were performed for ten to fifteen minutes with basic dance postures and music. From then the restructuring of the dance began by both scholars and practitioners of the dance incorporating elements from both Mahārī and Gotipua tradition. Most of them came from humble and non-dance traditions. However, through their talent, keen observation, assimilation, and relentless dedication, they revitalized the art form and evolved into true Gurus.⁸ The dancers with the revival found a new home and purpose in the theaters. The theaters which are famous for their open-air Jatra performances, played a pivotal role in shaping the future of Odissi. Accounts of prominent figures like Pankaj Charan Das, Mayadhar Rout, Kelucharan Mohapatra, and Debaprasad Das frequently emphasize their early affinity with these theatrical troupes or local akhadas. Figures like Mohan Sundar Goswami and Kalicharan Patnaik managed Ras Leela troupes, where renowned artists such as Kelucharan Mohapatra and Mayadhar Rout refined their talents.⁹

Among the theaters, Arnapura Theater took the center stage for the revival of Odissi in modern times. The prominent Odissi dance gurus like, Guru Pankaja Charana Das, Kelucharana Mohapatra, Mayadhara Rout and Deba Prashad Das were part of the Arnapura Theater by the late 1940s and early 1950s. While the fascination for the dance was rising among the public, Arnapura Theater's Mohini- Bhasmasura dance performance made Guru Kelucharana Mohapatra the leading figure of the revival movement of Odissi. Kelucharana's rendition of Mohini, performed by Laxmipriya, his wife etched its name in the history. The performance made Kelucharana-Laxmipriya duo an Odissi sensation overnight by also gaining international recognition. While Guru Kelucharana's straightforward style gained most of the popularity, Guru Pankaja Charana Das's style was a refined dance style, utilizing the Mahārī technique. Guru Deba Prashad Das on the other hand stuck to the Tantric tradition of Mahārī. Young girls from higher social class started to show interest in the dance form after watching Laxmipriya perform. Included in the group were notable individuals in

⁵ Ojha, M. (n.d.). The evolution of Odissi dance: From temple rituals to modern revival.2. International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR). <https://www.ijfmr.com>

⁶ Mishra, K. (2024, May). Resurgence of Odissi dance tradition in the 20th century. 431. The Academic: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 2(5). <https://www.theacademic.in>

⁷ Mishra, K. (2024, May). Resurgence of Odissi dance tradition in the 20th century. 432. The Academic: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 2(5). <https://www.theacademic.in>

⁸ Mishra, K. (2024, May). Resurgence of Odissi dance tradition in the 20th century. 432. The Academic: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 2(5). <https://www.theacademic.in>

⁹ Mishra, K. (2024, May). Resurgence of Odissi dance tradition in the 20th century. 432. The Academic: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 2(5). <https://www.theacademic.in>

the field of Odissi dance, including Sanjukta Mishra (later Panigrahi), who was the first to dedicate her entire career to Odissi, Minati Das (after Mishra), Jayanti Ghosh, Priyambada Mohanty (later Hizmadi), and Kumkum Das (later Mohanty).¹⁰ By 1950s many dance training institutions emerged in Cuttack under the guidance of different gurus. Among these Kala Vikash Kendra founded in 1952 has a significant role. Both Guru Kelucharana Mohapatra and Mayadhara Rout were associated to the institution in different times and both contributed significantly towards the revival of Odissi.

While Guru Kelucharana is attributed to popularize the dance form, Guru Mayadhara Rout and Guru Pankaj Charan Das were associated with systematizing Odissi by giving it a proper structure and literature. Guru Mayadhara taught the gurus participating in the revival about Mudra Viniyoga, which is the use of hand gestures, and Sanchari Bhava abhinaya, which is the expression of emotions through movement. He choreographed many astapadis from the “Geeta Gobinda” including “Pasyati Disidisi”, “Priye Carushila”, and “Chandana Charchita”. He also orchestrated several popular Mangala Charanas and Pallavis. The Jayantika Project was a significant development towards the standardization of Odissi. Formed by prominent Gurus and scholars, dance gurus like Pankaj Charan Das, Kelucharan Mohapatra, Debaprasad Das, and Mayadhar Rout played pivotal roles in this endeavor. In this project a consensus was finalized on the syllables and choreography. The syllables (Bols) were composed by Balbhadra Sahu and Agadhu Moharana, and the choreography by Kelucharan Mohapatra and Pankaj Charan Das. In her research paper titled “The Evolution of Odissi Dance: From Temple Rituals to Modern Revival” (2024), Mamata Ojha writes:

The Jayantika project sought to align Odissi with the principles of the Natya Shastra while integrating elements from the Gotipua and Mahārī traditions. This standardization involved refining the dance's technical aspects, including its movements, postures, and expressions. The project also focused on creating a standardized costume and jewelry style, contributing to the dance's cohesive aesthetic.¹¹

Another significant figure in the revival movement was Kalicharan Patnaik. He played a crucial role in researching

Odissi's historical connections to the Natya Shastra and presenting his findings at the 1958 All India Dance Seminar in New Delhi. All these dedicated efforts became significant pillars for the establishment of Odissi as a major classical dance tradition of India.

Odissi is famous for its grace and elegance. The subtle expressive movements of the dancers give Odissi a unique identity. Rooted in the guidelines of Nāṭyasāstra, Odissi has three main elements: Nritya (pure dance), Nritya (expressive dance), and Natya (dance drama). The performances were characterized by their geometric symmetry of the body movement called Bhangas. The Bhanga is the symmetrical body bends and stances. These harmonious blends of lower, mid and upper body movements are central to the Odissi dance aesthetics. The dance features distinct postures and movements, such as Bhumis (foot movements) and Charis (body movements), which have roots in the Mahārī tradition. The Abhinaya Chandrika, a key text for Odissi, mentions various mudras (hand gestures) and pada bhedas (foot positions) that are essential to the dance (Ojha 2024, 3). Another important feature of Odissi is Abhinaya. In Abhinaya, the dancers were storytellers who present the story and its emotion through body language, facial expression and hand gestures. This intricate style distincts Odissi from other dance forms. A dancer has to master the literature and grammar of the dance before performing Abhinaya on the stage. Abhinaya performances were deeply rooted in the rich poetic and music tradition of Odisha. Especially Jayadeva's “Geeta Gobinda” has a significant influence. The intricate spiritual romance depicted by Jayadeva gives the dancers a vast canvas to imagine and experiment with their art.

The repertoire of Odissi dance is comprised of different components such as invocation (Mangala Charan), pure dance (Pallavi), expressive dance (Abhinaya), dance drama (Natya), and the climax (Moksha), which is a symbolic process towards liberation. The process is backed by traditional Odissi music, which is very unique to the region and different from the Hindustani and Karnataki music traditions. There are specific Ragas (melodic patterns) and Talas (rhythmic patterns) unique to this tradition. The tempo of the music is neither too fast and nor too slow and flows in a proportional and soothing pace. The subtle wave like ornamentation (gati andolita) is another unique trait of Odissi music tradition. Mardala is the most vital instrument of Odissi. It has a unique playing style; sound and rhythm that add to the dance performance.

With the standardization, Odissi gained momentum. Gurus like Kelucharana Mohapatra and his celebrated Protege Sanjukta Panigrahi popularized the dance both in India and

¹⁰ Mishra, K. (2024, May). Resurgence of Odissi dance tradition in the 20th century. 434 The Academic: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 2(5). <https://www.theacademic.in>

¹¹ Ojha, M. (n.d.). The evolution of Odissi dance: From temple rituals to modern revival. International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR). <https://www.ijfmr.com>

around the World. They travelled around the world enchanting audiences with their performances. Guru Kelucharana's Pallavis and Astapadis have achieved the status of timeless masterpieces reflecting sophistication, beauty, and an overarching aesthetic that define his hallmark.¹² Guru Deva Prashad Das preferred Odia song over Sanskrit for his performances. He emphasized waist movements which were unique to the region and his incline towards the traditional style of Mahārī and Gotipua was evident in his compositions. Guru Surendranath Jena is famous for his element of poetic lethargy (Alasa) in Odissi which gained him a small but significant popularity. The significant influence of these gurus made them essential figures of Odissi. The first and second generation disciples of these legendary gurus are the true bearers of contemporary Odissi. Significant figures like, Minati Mishra, Priyambada Mohanty, Hazmadi, Sudhakar Sahoo, Dhuleswar Behera, Ritha Devi, Yamini Krishnamurthy, Ramli Ibrahim, Ganendra Kumar Panda, Sonal Mansingh, Kumkum Mohanty, Aruna Mohanty, Ileana Citaristi, Sharmila Biswas, Gangadhar Pradhan, Ratikanta Mohapatra, Sujata Mohapatra, Bijayini Satpathy, Madhavi Mudgal developed the dance with their experience and knowledge adding contemporary themes. For the efforts of these great dancers Odissi gained popularity globally. Dancers and dance enthusiasts from around the globe are showing interest in learning the dance form. These contemporary dancers are responsible for keeping the two thousand years old dance alive. Besides, their role in upkeeping the Indian Knowledge tradition of arts is vital as well. While experimenting and developing the dance form they are also contributing towards building a new generation of Odissi Dancers, following the footsteps of their prominent gurus.

The Odissi dance of 21st century is a result of a meticulous reconstruction of the Odra Māghadhī dance tradition mentioned in the Nāṭyasāstra. It also incorporates elements from the Mahārī legacy, Gotipua lineage, Chhau, and martial art. Moreover, it draws inspiration from temple sculptures and visual imagery. The journey of Odissi from the wall murals and carvings of the bygone era to the become an international sensation is a true certificate to the resilience and adaptability of this dance tradition. It prospered in the Mahārī tradition, survived with the Gotipuas of Puri Akhadas, until becoming Odissi of the 20th century for the efforts of many visionary gurus. Those gurus are no more around, but their legacy survived through their generations of students, those who come after them. The revival of Odissi is an undisputed

testament to the Guru Sishya Parampara of India, where the tradition of unwavering flow of knowledge continues from teachers to disciples defeating the test of time. With the changing times, Odissi dancers are experimenting with new grounds while sticking to their roots dip in the thousands of years old tradition. While Odissi dance masters the relationship between divine and devotion in the dance, the contemporary dancers are experimenting with new themes of societal changes. These new domains of Odissi are great signs of brighter future of Odissi. The introduction of Odissi as a Bachelors and Masters course in different universities fuels the progress of Odisha as it confirms a secure future for the art. Research centers like “Guru Kelu Charana Mohapatra Odissi Research Centre” in Bhubaneswar are initiatives towards a deeper understanding of the art form to take it further. These institutions’ steps help build new generation of Dancers to keep the tradition alive for the posterity, just like our ancestors preserved it for us.

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